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INFO RUCNMEM/EU MEMBER STATES COLLECTIVE PRIORITY
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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 CARACAS 001670

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E.O. 12958: DECL: 12/05/2018
TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [VE](#)
SUBJECT: CHAVEZ STEERING AN EVEN MORE AUTHORITARIAN COURSE

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Classified By: POLITICAL COUNSELOR FRANCISCO FERNANDEZ,
REASON 1.4 (D)

11. (C) Summary. President Chavez usually calibrates his efforts to concentrate power based on public opinion. But after losing the constitutional referendum in December 2007 and ceding more ground to the opposition in the November 23 state and local elections, the Venezuelan president appears to be becoming more erratic, aggressive, and authoritarian. In the last two weeks, Chavez has announced that he will hold a another referendum on presidential term limits within months. Moreover, Chavez's supporters in the Government of the Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela (GBRV) are pressing corruption charges against the de facto opposition leader, moving against an opposition-oriented cable news network, undermining newly elected opposition governors and mayors, and accusing opposition opinion-makers of plotting Chavez's assassination. While Chavez is stressing that his Bolivarian revolution is entering a new "phase," it is becoming increasingly clear that he is disposed to be even less democratic.
End Summary.

The Indispensable Leader

12. (C) Immediately following opposition gains in the November 23 state and local elections, President Chavez told international journalists that he was not personally interested in eliminating term limits, but would comply with the "people's will." Only days later, Chavez told his supporters that he is indispensable to the next "phase" of his Bolivarian revolution. He urged his supporters to launch a petition drive to put a constitutional amendment eliminating presidential term limits to a public referendum by February 2009. Chavez and his closest supporters now appear to be leaning toward proposing such an amendment via the National Assembly because that would take less time. The elimination of presidential term limits was part of Chavez's constitutional reform package that voters defeated in December 2007. Constitutional experts believe it is unconstitutional to put the same proposal up for a second vote in the same presidential term of office, but readily concede that Venezuela's highly politicized court system is unlikely to stand in the way.

Prosecuting Rosales

13. (C) While campaigning on behalf of PSUV candidates in Zulia, President Chavez repeatedly called Zulia Governor Manuel Rosales a criminal "mafioso" and said he should be jailed. A special commission of the National Assembly ordered former 2006 consensus opposition presidential candidate and incoming Maracaibo Mayor Manuel Rosales to testify on November 28 regarding alleged corruption. During several hours of questioning, Rosales disputed that he had improperly handled the Zulia's lottery system or illegally transferred official vehicles to government personnel. The National Assembly referred the case to prosecutors who have order Rosales to appear on December 11. Prosecutors could arrest Rosales on the spot at that time. Close Rosales advisor Angel Emiro Vera told Poloff December 4 that he expects the GBRV to first measure the opposition's "muscle" and test public opinion before deciding whether or not to jail Rosales.

Going After Globovision

14. (C) After winning the December 2006 presidential election by a wide margin, Chavez announced his intention to shutter the only opposition-oriented free-to-air television network in Venezuela, RCTV. The GBRV closed RCTV in May 2008. Since then, the cable news network Globovision has been the most important independent voice on the Venezuelan airwaves. Chavez asked that Globovision be investigated for reporting projected electoral results in advance of the National Electoral Council's (CNE's) official results, but CNE Rector Vicente Diaz responded that only CNE could order such an investigation.

15. (C) The GBRV telecommunications authorities (CONATEL) was
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already investigating Globovision for allegedly promoting the assassination of Chavez. The investigation is based on the network's October 30 transmission of the show "Hello, Citizen," in which a newspaper editor said that Chavez "would end up like Mussolini." After the elections, CONATEL opened up a second investigation of Globovision for covering a post-election speech of then Carabobo State gubernatorial candidate (and eventual winner) Henrique Salas Feo. Feo urged supporters to march on local electoral authorities to demand publications of the results of the gubernatorial race, and CONATEL contends that Globovision's coverage of his speech constituted incitement to violence. CONATEL could impose sanctions on Globovision ranging from fines to temporary or permanent closure.

Scorched Earth Transitions

16. (C) President Chavez almost immediately accused newly elected opposition governors and mayors of "fascism" and warned them that he would not stand by if they threatened the "interests of the people." The GBRV has engaged in a systematic campaign to circumvent and weaken newly-elected opposition governors and mayors. Outgoing PSUV governors and mayors in several polities quickly transferred key state and local entities, such as hospitals and transportation systems, to the central government prior to leaving office. There are widespread reports of outgoing PSUV administrations sacking state resources and destroying government files. The National Guard occupied city hall in Caracas; the newly elected opposition mayor Antonio Ledezma was sworn in at Engineers' Association building, and is still looking for physical space to start governing. Newly-elected Maracaibo Mayor Manuel Rosales is in the same position after the outgoing PSUV mayor transferred city hall office space to an NGO. Chavez could also invoke the July 31 decree-laws to create parallel regional and military authorities to circumvent such opposition officials even further.

More Vague Plot Accusations

¶7. (SBU) The National Assembly (NA) released a December 2 report calling on the Attorney General's Office (AG) to investigate retired military personnel, independent media owners, and businessmen for their supposed involvement in a conspiracy to assassinate President Chavez. It specifically mentions owner of daily El Nacional Miguel Henrique Otero, director of Radio Caracas Television-International (RCTV-I) cable network Marcel Granier, retired UN diplomat Diego Arria, former Defense Minister Baduel, Fedecamaras head Nelson Mezerhane, Globovision Director Alberto Ravell, editor of the opposition daily Un Nuevo Pais Rafael Poleo, and Manuel Rosales as the supposed leaders of the civilian front to destabilize the GBRV and to promote the assassination of Chavez.

¶8. (C) The National Assembly report also accused the USG of providing funds to destabilize Venezuela. NA deputies implored the government to look into the activities of the Embassy's five American Corners. The report relied heavily on transcripts from recorded messages between member of the opposition and accusations that the free media is employing subliminal messages. Podemos NA deputies and PSUV dissidents disputed the validity of the accusations, calling the effort a smear campaign. Opposition leaders have similarly denounced the report as an effort to justify persecution of key opposition opinion-makers.

Comment

¶9. (C) President Chavez, still Venezuela's most popular politician, appears determined to stay on the political offensive rather than scale back his rhetoric or slow the pace of his socialist revolution. Chavez garnered considerable legitimacy by winning big at the polls between 1998 and 2006, and masterfully calibrated his authoritarian governing style to centralize even more power in his hands. After suffering two consecutive setbacks at the polls, the Venezuelan president appears increasingly erratic, aggressive, and disposed to ignore democratic forms by moving against prominent critics and duly elected opposition officials. With full control over all branches of the central government, Chavez has the means at his disposal to

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put even more pressure on the few remaining pockets of democratic opposition in Venezuela.

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